

# Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada

Inuit women face critical challenges as a result of the rate of cultural and physical change over the past fifty years. There is an urgent need to implement strategies that address these circumstances and correspond to Canada's unique northern milieu. Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada embraces a holistic approach regarding the social and economic wellbeing of our constituents. We are conscious of the interrelated impacts on childcare, housing, sexual health, violence, economic development and poverty. Pauktuutit is very aware that addressing each issue in isolation is not practical. Rather, Pauktuutit affirms that improving the life circumstances of Inuit women relies on comprehensive strategies that are culturally relevant and that concentrate on the simultaneous crises that face Inuit women today.

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada attended and contributed to the recent first ever National Aboriginal Women's Summit held in Corner Brook Newfoundland and Labrador. The Summit convened representatives of Aboriginal women's organizations from across Canada under the overall theme of *Strong Women, Strong Communities*. Pauktuutit shared our knowledge on the themes addressed at the conference and proposed Inuit specific recommendations that are consistent with Inuit values, culture and perspective.

## Inuit Women in Canada

Within our communities, *it is women who tend to suffer the most, but ironically, they also are the best primary agents for bringing positive change*. Over the years Pauktuutit has worked hard to support women to promote social and economic development and to mitigate the negative impacts of change that came with established community life.

Over the last fifty years, traditional Inuit ways have been assaulted through assimilation—in the form of disease, forced relocation, residential schooling, removal of children, the introduction of drugs, alcohol and non-traditional foods, sexual assault and oppression, to name a few. These factors, coupled with culturally inappropriate strategies to 'help' Inuit have better lives, have disempowered Inuit in general and have sent the women of this society to its margins.

## Families

The challenge is to identify and act upon those elements of Inuit society that require immediate attention and will have sustainable outcomes. To this end, we must start with strengthening Inuit families. Building stronger families embraces a broad range of initiatives that promote progressive economic, health, and social change, leading to healthy and sustainable communities. These priorities are

closely associated with the concept of self sufficiency and it is unproductive to delineate between issues of health, diet, violence, safe shelters, safe and healthy housing, mental wellness counseling and economic development. Within our communities, the distinctions between these areas are neither clear nor straightforward.

## A Good Start

Pauktuutit is committed to Inuit children and youth and to a birthing system that reinforces Inuit family and social values. There is a need to teach and support the parenting skills that will provide the social network to strengthen community life. Early Childhood Development is a broad-based concept that must be directed towards the health and social development of Inuit children. It is much more than simply creating more daycare positions; it is healthy pregnancies; it is increasing the knowledge about sexual health; and it is the social support network that ensures our children have a healthy environment in which to grow.

## Equity and Empowerment

As the national voice of Inuit women, Pauktuutit works to ensure we are able to enjoy the same rights and benefits afforded to other Canadian citizens. Through Pauktuutit, Inuit women are recognized for our wisdom, perspective, and insight re-

garding regional, national, and global issues and for our powerful influence on community social issues, health, and wellness. Through Pauktuutit, Inuit women are empowered and have an independent voice. Through Pauktuutit, the Government of Canada can fulfill its Inuit-specific gender equity priorities in a consistent, coherent, culturally appropriate, and cost-effective manner.

Pauktuutit develops and implements a range of policies, programs, and strategies in partnership with Canada's public and private sectors. Through Pauktuutit, Inuit women's participation in relevant decision-making is increasing. Inevitably, this enhances the strength and vitality of all Inuit, our families, and communities.

### ***Gender-based Analysis***

Culturally Relevant GBA is an important tool to assess the relevancy of programs from an Inuit perspective. Pauktuutit is working on an *Inuit Culturally Relevant Gender Based Analysis* Project. This project is in two parts—the first part is the design of a Culturally Relevant Gender Based Analysis Framework and the second part is Culturally Relevant Health Indicators for Inuit Women. The framework is a guide to the indicators document. We are in Phase two of this very important project. This phase will test the assumptions of the framework and the health indicators and will add regional cultural differences into the framework/indicators documents.

### ***Economic Development***

Overcoming the barriers to economic development in the Inuit North involves active coordination of many different bodies as well as different levels of government - all working toward the creation of innovative approaches to economic development in the communities and the development of a mature and diversified economy that will provide both economic opportunities for Inuit and a standard of living equal to that enjoyed by other Canadians. The

success of businesses and investments in the North rests upon the social and economic well-being of the inhabitants of Canada's northern communities. The full participation of Inuit women in the northern economy is crucial, and this participation both depends on and results in healthy and viable communities. Commitment to engagement of and with Inuit women in all business and investment strategies is the strongest possible assurance for economic success.

Pauktuutit is devoted to increasing the economic independence of Inuit women, providing the confidence, the tools, and the opportunities to achieve economic success and to overcome the barriers that prevent Inuit women from achieving economic self-sufficiency.

### ***Inuit Women in Business***

The goal of Pauktuutit's *Inuit Women in Business* initiative is to enable more Inuit women to become self-employed and thus increase economic self-sufficiency for ourselves and our families. Ongoing partnerships with stakeholder organizations are considered key to the success of this initiative. The intent of the partnerships is to build and reinforce linkages between the partners and Inuit women entrepreneurs in order to provide ongoing support for women entrepreneurs at all stages: pre-business training, business start up and aftercare support for established businesses.

### ***Sexual Health***

Inuit communities suffer from very high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), specifically gonorrhea and chlamydia, and alarming rates of teenage pregnancies. As of 2000, teen pregnancy rates were over two and a half times the national average in NWT; over four times the national average in Nunavut. Also in Nunavut, The rates of STIs and teen pregnancy among Inuit would indicate a grave potential for entry and spread of Hep C and HIV/AIDS, the most deadly of STIs.

There is a high level of fear, stigma and discrimination in Inuit communities when it comes to people living with HIV/AIDS and Hep C. The lack of openness around the topic causes increased risk of infection and makes it very difficult for Inuit PHA's (People with HIV/Hep C and AIDS) to stay in our home communities. The lack of knowledge about the illness often leads to isolation and ostracization for the Inuit PHA and can force them to stay in and hide their illness or else flee to urban centres where they may access care and treatment. This isolation and transition on top of a very aggressive and deadly illness can be overwhelming for many. Some fall through the cracks and become street-involved/homeless and vulnerable in the very urban centres where they went to get help.

The focus of the Sexual Health Unit at Pauktuutit is to engage in HIV/AIDS myth-busting and de-stigmatization education programs for Inuit of all ages. Besides being engaged directly with Inuit youth on the many themes of sexual health through community fairs, Pauktuutit produces culturally appropriate tools and resources to facilitate awareness and to foster open discussions.

### ***Urban Inuit: A Woman's Perspective***

One in ten Inuit now live in Canada's urban centres. Inuit come to St. John's, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Edmonton, in order to pursue education and career opportunities. While seeking a better life, they are often at higher risk for substance abuse, sexual exploitation and homelessness in the cities to which they have moved. Still others move to the South to access specialized healthcare and treatment options that are not available in their home community.

New comers to urban centres are often unaware of resources that might be available to them and/or they are unsure or unable to access these resources. Access to childcare, healthcare, health insurance, housing,

to name but a few, can be fraught with bureaucracy that is nearly impossible to negotiate. Language barriers also present a challenge to those Inuit who are unilingual Inuktitut speakers. An Inuk woman who cannot negotiate the system may not be able to access the childcare she needs in order to take advantage of the education and employment opportunities she came down for in the first place.

Perhaps most importantly, urban Inuit are often not counted at Census time because of the language barrier. When governments use these statistics to make policies, the Inuit population is not taken into consideration because they were not counted properly.

### What Would Help?

- More holistic approaches to policy development and more collaboration among government departments and levels of government, regarding; housing, abuse issues, food security, economic development, health, children, maternal care....;

- New solutions for financial issues. For small entrepreneurs in isolated communities, lack of access to banking services and financial credit can be barriers. Micro-credit is a tool particularly well suited to tiny, one-person enterprises, especially those initiated by women. It is gaining attention world-wide and worthy of assessment in a northern context. Cooperative banking is another alternative to be explored;

- Invest in and implement the National Strategy to Prevent Abuse in Inuit Communities working in partnerships with Pauktuutit and communities and other partners;

- Develop tools for culturally relevant GBA/Health Indicators for Inuit Women. Pauktuutit would like to work with Provincial/Territorial governments to ensure GBA and the cultural relevancy of government programs and services;

- Promote programs that build on Inuit strengths and prevent abuse. Focus on delivering culturally-rel-

evant services that heal—services that recognize healing as a process rather than a single act or event or a compensation payment.

*To view Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada's Inuit specific recommendations presented to the National Aboriginal Women's Summit, please visit our website: [www.pauktuutit.ca](http://www.pauktuutit.ca). You will also find corresponding documentation on the full scope of Pauktuutit's work in such areas as Midwifery, Early Child Development, Abuse Prevention, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, and Intellectual Property Rights.*

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Candidates should have three letters of reference, an application letter and a curriculum vitae sent to: Professor Mary Lynn Stewart, Chair, Department of Women's Studies, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6. Email: [mstewart@sfu.ca](mailto:mstewart@sfu.ca). Tel: 778-782-5526. Fax: 778-782-5518.

Completed applications must be received by the Department of Women's Studies no later than January 15, 2009. Please send a hard copy of the curriculum vitae and letter of application. Letters of reference may be sent by email or fax providing a signed copy of the letter is sent at the same time by regular mail or courier. Email inquiries are welcome and should be sent to [mstewart@sfu.ca](mailto:mstewart@sfu.ca).

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